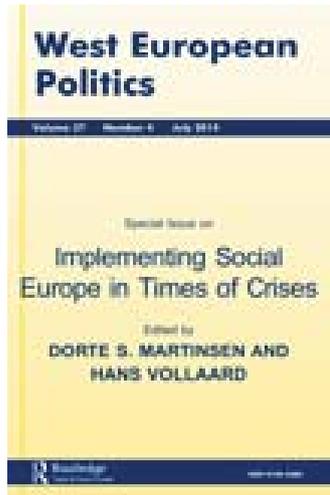


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Social Europe and its Components in the Midst of the Crisis: A Conclusion

MAURIZIO FERRERA

The article starts by identifying the main institutional components of the (elusive) concept of Social Europe: the 'National Social Spaces', i.e. the social protection systems of the member states; the 'EU Social Citizenship Space', i.e. the coordination regime that allows all EU nationals to access the social benefits of other member states when they exercise free movement; the 'Regional Social Spaces', i.e. sub-national and/or trans-regional social policies; and the 'EU Social Policy' proper. Based on such reconceptualisation, the article then revisits the main analytical insights and substantive findings of the volume's contributions, focusing in particular on dynamics of 'social re-bounding' during the crisis, on national implementation processes, on the relevance of 'fits' and 'misfits' for social policy compliance and on issues of democratic control. In the conclusion, some suggestions for future research and for the EU's social agenda are put forward.

In historical perspective, the national systems of social protection can be seen as the end result of a long process of 'bounding' and 'bonding'. During the twentieth century, the consolidation of territorial borders and the establishment of compulsory social insurance ('bounding') fed increasingly stronger shared ties ('bonding') among the bearers of national citizenship. In the absence of strong state boundaries eliciting feelings of solidarity among insiders, the formation of fully fledged public welfare systems with high redistributive capacity would not have been possible. As highlighted by the so-called 'state-building school' on political development, the formation of the European Union is partly replicating – under drastically changed circumstances – the process of boundary-building which, starting from the sixteenth century, led to the modern system of nation-states (Bartolini 2005; Ferrera 2005; Flora 2000). This time round, however, the bounding–bonding nexus is considerably more complicated and cannot be taken for granted. While incisively re-drawing economic boundaries, the EU has indeed also adopted a growing number of social provisions, especially since the Maastricht Treaty. But the construction of a 'Social Europe' is faced with a daunting mission, as it involves putting in place a new,

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socially friendly boundary configuration by working at the margins of the traditional and highly resilient set of state boundaries; this means engaging in dangerous balancing acts between ‘opening’ and ‘closure’. Too much opening (i.e. removing or weakening state prerogatives and the preferential treatment of insiders) may be good for the creation of a standardised EU social citizenship, but may be bad for the stability of national solidarity spaces. Too much closure, on the other hand, hinders the development of any form of supranational or at least cross-national solidarity in the form of either inter-territorial (among the member states) and inter-personal transfers (among EU citizens as such). The options of reconciling opening and closure through a distinctive EU social policy are in their turn limited by the very strength and size of the national spaces, which constrain the scope of the supranational level’s budget and competences in the social sphere. Finally, contrary to the nation-state experience, the EU has very weak institutional and enforcement capacities: it has to rely on national instruments and resources to execute its policies. In their turn, member states are eager to preserve at least some discretion in execution, which is often seen as the last bastion of national sovereignty.

Given its key significance for socio-political order and for people’s life chances, the social protection sphere is especially sensitive to the issue of sovereignty, in both the ‘capacity’ and ‘autonomy’ dimensions of this concept. The former relates to the power to effectively direct and control social behaviours, to actually steer and win the ‘daily plebiscite of citizenship’. The latter has instead to do with the effective margins of manoeuvre which are firmly in the hands of national executives. By following the *fil rouge* of implementation in the EU social policy process it is possible to unveil the ‘inner core’ of state sovereignty (Martinsen and Vollaard 2014). The implementation process is in fact the locus where an appropriate *practical* balance can be found between supranational authority and national autonomy, legal compliance and contextual discretion. When a hard law provision is enacted by the EU, national sovereignty is inevitably eroded, but not entirely negated. A lot remains to be decided and done, not only during transposition, but also in the phase that stretches from the latter to actual application on the ground. Research into this grey area is still in its infancy: we know little about whether and how Social Europe is actually implemented (in a full sense), about the social, political and institutional determinants of implementation and about its effects on ‘bonding’ dynamics. The few studies that are available (of limited comparative and analytical scope) indicate that there are gaps, inconsistencies and variations, and thus that there is room and need for more systematic and in-depth research efforts (see Falkner 2010 for a discussion).

As explained by Martinsen and Vollaard (2014) in the Introduction, this volume was aimed precisely at advancing in this promising direction. The various contributions have addressed different aspects of implementation, in different policy sub-fields of Social Europe, in different countries and temporal moments. The volume has not tried to make a path-breaking quantum leap within the literature – an output that may only stem from systematic and

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